

SEE THE MAJOR MOTION PICTURE!

# PARANORMAN

A novel by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel  
Illustrated by Ross Stewart



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
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A Novel

by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel

Based on the animated feature screenplay by

Chris Butler

Illustrated by Ross Stewart



Little, Brown and Company  
New York Boston

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Then the Blithe Hollow witch placed a  
dreadful curse upon the judge and jury.

# Prologue

*“You have been arraigned for the detestable arts of witchcraft and sorcery. You have feloniously and maliciously performed evil works against your fellow townspeople, witnessed by these good citizens who have gathered here to render their testimony. Have you anything to say to the court at this time? Are you prepared to admit your evil works and repent?”*

*“Very well, then, good people of Blithe Hollow. By thy witness, she will neither confess nor repent. Keep your hearts clear in the knowledge that she has denied this final opportunity to burn this sin from her soul by confession. You have, by the jury of these six peers empowered by our sovereign, King James, been found guilty of all the grievous crimes of which you are accused. The punishment is death. . . . No, witch, it is too late for you to speak. Silence, witch! Good jurors and townspeople, be not fearful. There is no curse. There is no curse!”*



“Let’s see. According to this, you are a common toad. Latin genus name *Bufo bufo*.”

# Chapter One

On the day Norman Babcock was born, *strange things* happened. Norman heard some of the birthday stories right from his own mother—how all the lights in the maternity ward blew their fuses at the very moment the doctor announced, “It’s a boy!” How the dogs across town set up a strange chorus of howling right around that same time. How two guys coming off their shift at Witchy Weiner saw a rainbow in the sky—which might not sound that weird but really was when you added in the details that it was one in the morning and that the rainbow was shaped like a huge question mark. . . . Well, that’s what they said. (It could have just been indigestion, though.)

So when a toad floating in a jar of bad-smelling stuff to keep it perfectly preserved began waving at Norman right there in the middle of Mr. Feynman’s seventh-

grade bio class, Norman was not surprised. He was not surprised at all. His ability to communicate with the dead wasn't limited to humans—animal ghosts had a lot to say, too, in their own way.

Norman waved back at the toad, who seemed pleased to be acknowledged. It almost looked as if it was giving Norman a gummy smile, but the amphibian caught sight of someone at the back of the classroom. Its face turned pale, as much as that was possible for a dead toad.

Norman knew who sat at the back of the classroom, near the spider terrarium and the old hamster ball (abandoned since the sudden disappearance of the hamster last Tuesday) and the pink plastic pig that had been sliced down the middle to give the curious a good look at the inner workings of the porcine digestive system.

“Yeah, that’s Alvin,” Norman told the toad. “He likes to hit stuff. Think of him as our token Cro-Magnon boy. No disrespect to cavemen, though.”

The toad blinked its bulbous eyes and made no expression, as if to suggest its utter acceptance of this description.

“Sad but true,” Norman said, running one hand

through his shock of dark brown hair that stood straight up on his head like it was trying to escape.

The toad made a small croak, as if to whisper a secret, so Norman leaned in really close, his nose almost pressed up against the glass.

The toad eyeballed Norman, then looked down at itself. Then it flicked its tongue out to point to the classroom door.

“You want to go to a different room?” Norman asked.

The toad shook its head.

There was a sudden burst of laughter from the back of the room.

“No way!” came a voice that sounded like the start of a bad soundtrack to an even-worse production of *The Bullies of Blithe Hollow*. “Dudes, for real—Norman is *talking* to his frog! Alvin says that ain’t normal!”

Norman sighed, bracing himself for a classic Alvin Attack. Mr. Feynman had a reputation for disappearing into the faculty bathroom with his newspaper when his students were supposed to be recording “scientific observations,” so Norman knew there would be no help from that quarter.

“What’s the frog sayin’ to you, Norman?” Alvin sang. “Does he want to be best frog friends forever?”

The toad sighed, too, and gave Norman an irritated look, gesturing at a label, yellowed with age and partly peeling off its jar.

“You’re not a frog; you’re a toad,” Norman said. “Yeah, you must get so tired of people making that mistake. Let’s see. According to this, you are a common toad. Latin genus name *Bufo bufo*.”

The little creature nodded with evident pride.

Alvin erupted in one of his patented Alvin Hyena Laughs, one that Norman was secretly sure involved at least a small amount of pants-wetting.

“Dudes, did you hear that? Norman named his new friend Boofo Boofo! I think this is it—I think Normie has finally gone Boofo Boofo himself! Call the guys in the white jackets!”

“*Bufo bufo*, the common toad, of the family of true toads, Bufonidae,” stated a high, prim voice coming from just behind Norman.

The toad’s expression brightened, and it tried to float to the right a little so it could get a glimpse of who had just spoken.

“That’s Salma,” Norman said, sitting with his chin

in his hands, waiting for something to land on Alvin—a lightning bolt or a band of crazed winged monkeys—anything that might unexpectedly silence him. “She’s a brain.”

“Brown or green in color, they are toothless and sometimes warty in appearance,” Salma continued.

The toad looked a little embarrassed by that and ran one webby foot over its head, as if checking for new warts.

“Is there something wrong with your *Bufo bufo*?” Salma asked Norman.

“I don’t know,” Norman said. “I mean, it’s already dead and in a jar—what else can happen to it?”

The toad pushed both webbed feet up as if it were trying to lift the lid off the jar.

“You want out of the jar,” Norman said, and the toad nodded.

“But you’re, um...dead and all that,” Norman pointed out, as kindly as he could.

The toad tucked its feet under its chin and closed its eyes.

“Oh. Now I understand,” Norman said. And he did. Perfectly.

“What?” Salma asked.

“It wants a proper grave,” Norman said. The toad opened its eyes and croaked enthusiastically.

“I get it,” Norman told it. “You just want to rest in peace.”

Norman felt something poke his arm. He glanced in the direction of the plump finger attached to the meaty arm coming out of the roundness that was Neil Downe.

“Norman, come on, man,” Neil whispered. “Take it down a notch. Stop talking to your bio project. You’re giving Alvin tons of ammo here—he’s going to be giving you grief for days!”

That was pretty rich, Neil Downe telling anybody to take it down a notch. Neil was chubbier than any other kid in school, his hair was redder and frizzier, and his voice was squeakier. Also, he had a lunch box with a kitten on it. And that’s just for starters. Neil always acted all friendly to Norman, but he just didn’t get it—Norman didn’t need friends.

“Whatever,” Norman said, turning away in his seat and repositioning the toad’s jar so Neil couldn’t see it. “Give me a minute or two to come up with a plan,” he told the toad.

“Oh wait. . . . Norman only plays with dead things,” came Alvin’s bleating voice. “He must be talking to a

ghost frog! Hah, that's it! Norman's a ghost-frog whisperer!"

Alvin cracked himself up bad with that last remark. He was making this gross wheezing noise as he laughed, and his mouth sounded kind of full, like he had forgotten to swallow. He'd be drooling soon.

"Do you mind?" Salma said to Alvin sharply. "Some of us are trying to create a Venn diagram for our organisms by taxonomic classification."

"Like, duh!" Alvin spluttered. "Salma's origami is the *classiest!*"

The toad scowled. Norman looked at its warty head and got an idea. He turned around and looked at Alvin.

"That thing on your thumb is a wart, and it's never going to go away, no matter what you do," Norman stated.

Alvin's mouth dropped open midcackle. He extended his thumb in front of his face and squinted at it, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He looked like a mountain gorilla trying to figure out what a Game Boy was—except not as intelligent.

Norman sighed with relief, glad he had distracted Alvin, and then turned back to the jar. The toad's ghost

was floating slightly above its body, which bobbed up and down in the bad-smelling stuff. Norman could see a faint image of his own face reflected in the glass, his deep blue eyes looking weirdly disembodied.

Neil Downe was right about one thing. Norman had given Alvin plenty of bullying ammo by talking to a dead toad in bio class. Stealing the toad would probably make things much worse. For the next couple of days, maybe even the next week, gym class and lunch were going to be brutal.

But this was what Norman did. He'd been seeing and hearing ghosts for as long as he could remember, and he'd finally started talking back to them about a year ago, just around the time his grandmother died. The dead toad wasn't the only spirit who needed Norman to do him a favor. Blithe Hollow was utterly teeming with phantom people and animals competing for Norman's attention. He talked to every single one of them wherever they found him—walking home from school, on the playground, over at Witchy Weiner. If that made him an outcast, well, whatever. Norman had never really been too keen on being an *incast* in the first place. As far as he could tell, most living people were vastly overrated.

“Okay,” Norman told the toad. “I think I have a plan to get you out of here.”

As the toad swam in a circle in delight, Mr. Feynman returned to the classroom. At about the same time, the missing hamster shot out from behind a dusty display labeled THE JOY OF INVERTEBRATES and began careening from one end of the room to the other. Someone yelled, “It’s a mouse!” And someone else shouted, “It’s a rat!” And Neil Downe shrieked, “It has rabies!” And that was about the time Alvin began screaming like a girl, Salma put her hands over her ears, and the fire alarm went off.

In all the commotion, nobody noticed Norman putting his books in his bag, tucking the toad’s jar under one arm, and walking out of the classroom. He might get a pink slip from the hall monitor or a tardy mark from the cafeteria monitor, but Norman didn’t care. He slipped out the side door near the playground and headed to a swampy little spot just beyond the swing set. He’d worry about Alvin and pink slips later.

Right now, he had some eternal rest to take care of.



"There's a library book in my office, and I'm just not going to be able to get any eternal rest until someone takes it back."

## Chapter Two

Grandma Babcock's funeral had been disturbing for a number of reasons.

First, obviously, was the fact that it *was* a funeral. Grandma Babcock had been super old, and she'd died very peacefully sitting on the couch watching *As the Doctors' Day Turns*, which was her favorite program. But Norman missed Grandma, and judging by the eye-makeup smudges and the lack of rude comments, so did his sister, Courtney. Norman's parents had both asked him about twenty times to not do anything "not normal" during the funeral. His dad was also very tense about some crazy old uncle they were afraid would show up and make a scene. If there was anything Perry Babcock hated in the world, it was having the wrong kind of attention drawn to his family. Which, unfortunately, seemed to happen a lot when Norman was around.

Norman didn't plan to do anything but stand by the refreshment table and avoid people. Courtney kept going into the ladies' room and coming out with her makeup even more smudged, so Norman decided to leave her alone, too. Anyway, he preferred to enjoy his own memories of his grandmother, rather than being asked the same old questions by thirty different people. It wasn't like he would never see her again. Norman had been seeing ghosts since he could remember, and chances were, Grandma Babcock would show up sooner or later. But nobody else would be able to see her, and that was bound to cause complications. The dead always did.

When you can see dead people, you are instantly very popular—but only among dead people. So Norman hadn't been in the funeral home for more than ten minutes when a group of noisy ghosts gathered around him.

"Listen, it's only a one-sentence message: 'The mayonnaise in the fridge has gone bad.' Can you just tell her that, please?"

The gauzy, glowing image of a bookish old guy in a striped sweater-vest and thick glasses bobbed anxiously in front of him. Little luminous spirit orbs wafted

gently around his head. Norman didn't respond, so the guy just repeated his question louder.

"Well, I could try," Norman said, trying not to look like he was talking. He'd never actually talked back to a ghost before, at least not in front of anybody.

"Wait, my message is only one sentence, too," said a large, blue-haired woman holding an enormous purse. "It's this: 'The cats do not like to be bathed.' Can you tell him that? 'The cats do not like to be bathed.' Felix Porter, Twenty-Seven Elm Street, phone number 990-6888."

"Oh, I can give you a phone number, too," said Bookish Guy.

"Listen, would you both pipe down for a second?" said a see-through fireman floating about a foot off the ground, teems of spirit orbs clustered around his head like bubbles. "I've got something really important I need to communicate here. It's about grease fires."

Norman looked around nervously. Because no one else could see or hear the ghosts, Norman would appear to be by the refreshment table chatting with himself. Which was fine, up to a point. But if his father noticed, he would most definitely get upset. Mr. Babcock hated it when Norman didn't act normal. And he almost never acted normal. *Paranormal* was more like it.

“Bad mayo, no cat baths, got it,” he murmured, holding a glass of orange punch in front of his face to disguise the movement of his lips.

“Well, my message is a little more complicated,” said the fireman. “You’ll probably want to take notes. Got a pen?”

“Let me go first, then,” said the tallest, thinnest, baldest ghost Norman had ever seen. “There’s a library book in my office, and I’m just not going to be able to get any eternal rest until someone takes it back.”

Norman was reaching for a cookie to buy some time when he noticed something going on at the front door. A weird-looking man was trying to come in, and one of the dark-suited funeral-home guys was trying to keep him out. The man trying to come in was big and old-looking, his face covered by a bushy beard. He was wearing faded pants that were coming apart at the seams and an old green vest with several rips in it.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we do ask that visitors maintain a...certain dress code,” the funeral-home guy was saying.

The weird man caught sight of Norman staring at him.

“Look, it’s okay—all I want to do is talk to *him* for a minute,” he said, pointing straight at Norman.

“Get in line, buster!” shouted Blue-Haired Lady. “Listen, kid, don’t you have a cell phone or something? It’s just one lousy phone call.”

“You! I need to talk to you!” the man called from the door. He was looking kind of crazed. He didn’t even have shoes on, just an old bag wrapped around each foot. What was this guy, some kind of nut job? Norman looked around the room nervously to see if people realized the nut job was addressing *him*.

The room was already mostly filled because it was a small town and everybody knew Grandma Babcock. Even Alvin was there, under the watchful eye of his terrifyingly thin grandmother. Norman pretended he didn’t see Alvin. But Alvin sure saw him. And sure enough, half the town had stopped what they were doing to look around and see who was yelling in the doorway. And when they saw the crazy man pointing at Norman, they all turned and looked at Norman, too!

“No, *I* need to talk to him,” shouted Bookish Guy, his spirit orbs dancing as if they were angry, too. “Buzz off, mister.”

“Norman,” began the crazy man.

Wait. How did this guy know his name?

“Do you have a cell phone?” asked Blue-Haired Lady.

“It’s not even real mayonnaise; it’s salad dressing,” added Bookish Guy. “Can you just go over there and throw it in the garbage? She always leaves the back door unlocked.”

“Listen, the book is called *Get Rich Knitting*. It’s in my desk drawer. Okay?”

“Kid, where’s your pen?” asked the fireman.

“Just hang on a second!” Norman exclaimed, still staring at the nutty-looking bearded man. Seriously, how *did* the guy know Norman’s name? Could this be the crazy old uncle Mr. Babcock didn’t want at the funeral?

“Sir, if you could please step away from the door,” said the funeral-home director, looking distressed.

“I need that kid for one minute!” the man insisted. “You crazies clear out.”

Norman blinked and then froze. Had the old man just talked . . . to the *ghosts*?

“Take a number!” shouted the ghost with glasses. “He’s helping me stop a case of food poisoning!”

“No, he’s helping me,” insisted Blue-Haired Lady. “990-6888. Just call!”

“Look, public safety trumps the both of you, and this kid is helping me spread the word about how to put out grease fires!” hollered the fireman.

"I saw him first!" insisted the bald guy who wanted to get rich knitting.

Norman whirled around to face the line of ghosts.

*"All of you just leave me alone! You have too many problems!"* Norman bellowed at the top of his lungs.

The entire room fell silent. When he turned back around, every person there, dead and alive, was staring at Norman.

The only sound was Alvin's snorts of laughter. "Dude, you're the only one standing there! Who are you talking to, the vegetable dip?" he shouted before his grandmother shushed him.

Norman glowered at Alvin, but that only made him laugh harder.

The funeral-home guy gave the crazy man a discreet but powerful push backward and firmly closed the door. Over by one of the flower arrangements, Norman's father was hanging his head. Then he raised his eyes and looked right at his son. And although he didn't say anything, Norman knew exactly what he was thinking.

He had humiliated his father once again.



“Zombies can’t talk—they mostly groan,”  
Norman said.

## Chapter Three

Norman sat quietly, observing the zombie as he stalked the perky teenage girl, his eye sockets glittering darkly and his smile crammed with broken, rotting teeth. Norman did not move from his spot on the floor next to the worn, sagging sofa even though he had seen this play out all too many times before. He knew the zombie was about to burst into the old cabin, where the girl was hiding. She was about to kick the bucket, and it wasn't going to be pretty.

"What's happening now?" came a voice behind him.

Norman's eyes remained glued to the television.

"The zombie is about to eat her head, Grandma,"

Norman told her.

One morning not long after her own funeral, Grandma Babcock had strolled into the living room right through a solid wall, as casually as if she'd just been down at the store getting a quart of milk. She'd

been hanging around the house, mostly on the living room couch with Norman, ever since. It had been going on about eleven months now, and she showed no signs of wanting to leave.

“That’s not very nice,” Grandma Babcock remarked. “What’s he doing that for?”

“Because he’s a zombie,” Norman explained. “That’s what they do.”

“Well, he’s going to ruin his jacket,” Grandma Babcock observed. “I’m sure if they just bothered to sit down and talk it through, it’d be a whole different story.”

“Zombies can’t talk—they mostly groan,” Norman said.

“Well, look at him. My goodness!” Grandma exclaimed as the camera zoomed in on the hideous leering face. “He looks like death on toast. What he needs to do is eat right, and take a little exercise. Maybe a nice power nap.”

Norman chuckled. “He could use a rest, all right,” he said. “A nice, eternal rest. He could—”

“Norman Babcock!” yelled a deep voice from the direction of the kitchen.

Norman winced.

“Didn’t I tell you to take out the garbage?” the voice boomed.

Norman shot his grandmother an apologetic look as he got to his feet.

“Coming, Dad,” he called.

It was really too bad—the zombie was just unhinging his jaw so he could get a really good bite of the teenager’s skull. She was going to bleed like crazy. His father always interrupted during the good stuff.

Grandma Babcock gave Norman a look, squinting at him through her thick glasses and adjusting her pink-and-blue velour tracksuit.

“Tell him to turn up the thermostat, will ya?” she asked. “My feet are like ice.”

Norman nodded and shuffled into the kitchen glumly.

“About time,” Norman’s dad grumbled. “Did you not hear the last twenty times I asked you to take out the trash? I was yelling loud enough to wake the dead.”

Norman wordlessly opened the lid of the garbage can to tie up the bag. It *smelled* bad enough to wake the dead, too, he thought. And who was his dad trying to fool, all decked out in his Tool Town Professional Craftsman belt and safety goggles? He was changing a stupid lightbulb, for crud’s sake.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” his mother said, her back to him as she emptied the dishwasher. “You can get back to your show as soon as you toss that outside. Whaddya watching?”

“A movie about a zombie who eats brains,” Norman said.

“That’s nice,” said his mother.

“But they have to be from living people,” Norman added. “So the zombie has to bite their heads open while they’re still alive.”

“Sounds cute,” his mom said, examining a spoon, then placing it back in the dishwasher.

Norman sighed and hauled the garbage bag out of the container.

“Zombies again?” his father muttered, pushing and pulling at the lightbulb with no visible result. “Why can’t you be like other kids and pitch a tent in the yard in your free time, or save your allowance for a nice tool kit?”

“Because I like zombies,” Norman said. *Because I like dead stuff in general*, he added silently. But he’d never say something like that out loud. In the eleven years he’d been on the planet, Norman had become something of an expert at flying under the radar, hiding

his true personality. Oh, it was there, if you really looked. But no one ever did. Norman had learned early in life that all you had to do to avoid attention was to blend in, like wallpaper. But there was no disguising his love of zombie movies. One only had to walk into his room, which was covered with horror film posters and action figures and light-up zombie heads, to know that. Mr. Babcock stared at his son for a moment, then sighed and shook his head.

Grandma Babcock appeared in the doorway.

“Did you ask him about the thermostat?” she reminded Norman. “What in stars is he doing up there, anyway? Honestly. Tell him it’s lefty loosey, righty tighty. Nothing’s ever going to get done until he changes that stupid lightbulb.”

Grandma Babcock stormed back to the living room. Norman stared at his father as he struggled with the light fixture.

“It’s lefty loosey, righty tighty,” he said.

Norman’s dad stared at his son for a moment. Then he turned the lightbulb to the left. It popped neatly out of the socket. “Where’d you hear that?” he asked. “I haven’t heard that expression in...oh man, Norman, the garbage is stinking up the whole house! What’s wrong with you?”

“Maybe I should go shoplifting and joyriding like Courtney’s friends?” Norman muttered under his breath, dragging the bag across the floor.

“Norman!” his mother said. “That isn’t nice.” Her sense of hearing was terrifyingly good sometimes.

Norman pushed open the back door with his foot as he hoisted the garbage bag up. Before he could carry it through the door, something shot through it. All Norman saw was a blur with blond hair and a cell phone, and a whiff of Crimson Cinnamon-scented lip gloss.

“Oh yeah, he is totally R-I-double-P-E-D! Like, a seven-pack at least! Norman, ew, you stink!”

Courtney reached out a perfectly pink manicured finger and poked Norman in the stomach.

“No, sorry, I was talking to my skunk-boy brother,” Courtney said into her phone, wrinkling her nose to emphasize her disgust. “I know, right? I would if it were legal, or if I could get away with it.”

“Courtney, be nice,” Mrs. Babcock said automatically, still examining dishes and replacing them in the dishwasher.

*Oh, I am being nice,* Courtney thought. Really, her parents had no idea the personal and social costs of

having Norman Babcock for a little brother. He was sooo weird. Who else in the known universe brushed his teeth with a zombie toothbrush while letting the toothpaste foam out of his mouth so he could pretend to be one of the walking dead, too? Courtney was positive she was already damaged for life just from having to share a bathroom with the kid.

Norman kicked open the screen door with his foot, walked several feet onto the back walkway, and hurled the plastic bag in the general direction of the garbage cans. Then he walked back inside, slamming the door behind him and heading for the living room, where he could hear the brain-nibbling zombie theme rising dramatically from the television set. He paused in the doorway that separated the living room from the kitchen.

“Oh, and, Dad? Grandma wants you to turn up the heat. Her feet are like ice.”

Norman heard the clatter of a fork hitting the kitchen floor at the same moment his father jumped heavily off the ladder.

“Norman Babcock,” his father said in his deepest, most newscaster voice.

Norman slowly turned to his father.

Of course, the easiest thing would have been to simply not pass along Grandma's request. But she had specifically asked. To ignore her would have been just rude. Life seemed complicated enough without having to resort to *that*.

"Okay, I know that *you* know that your grandmother is dead," Mr. Babcock said.

Norman scowled.

"Yep," he said.

"Then why do you insist on talking to her?" Mr. Babcock asked sharply, dropping the new lightbulb he'd just unwrapped. The bulb made an ominous tinkling sound when it hit the floor and shattered.

"Because," Norman replied slowly, "she talks back!"

Courtney snapped her phone shut and gave her brother what she thought was a withering look.

"OMG, you are such a little liar," she drawled.

"I am not," Norman retorted. "She asks me stuff all the time. She tells me stuff, too."

Courtney rolled her eyes so wildly, she threw herself off balance a little. She kicked off both of her hot-pink sneakers, plopped down at the kitchen table, and locked eyes with her brother.

“Oh yeah?” she challenged. “Prove it!”

Norman returned her steely gaze. He did not like to flaunt his connection with the underworld, which gave him access to all kinds of information that could, if in the wrong hands, really flip people out. But the subject had come up now, and Courtney was asking for it. To be fair, she was practically begging.

“Well, Grandma says you have pictures of the varsity football quarterback with his shirt off hidden in your underwear drawer,” he told her.

Courtney’s face instantly turned crimson with fury as she leaped to her feet. Nobody was supposed to know that. If word got out in school, her life would be ruined. She would have to move to another state. Probably another country!

“You disgusting, spying little *creep*!” she exploded, flouncing out of the kitchen, her blond ponytail bobbing furiously behind her.

Norman was left with the dual images of his mother, who looked dismayed and a bit angry and was hiding it with a smile, and his father, who looked angry and a bit dismayed and was hiding it with a scowl.

“Sweetie, the important thing is that Grandma’s in a better place now,” his mother began.

Norman felt that if it were possible for a human to fly into bits from sheer frustration, he was going to do it right now. How could he be related to any of these people? By what mutation of science did any of them share his DNA?

“A better place?” his father mocked. “We all know where Grandma is, Sandra. For Pete’s sake, why don’t we all start by just calling it what it is?”

“The living room?” asked Norman.

Then he turned on his heel and walked away before either of his parents could react.

Norman watched the rest of the movie with Grandma Babcock partly because she needed him to explain parts of it to her and partly because he really loved the scene at the end when the rest of the zombies came lurching out of the graveyard and chartered a schooner and set sail on the high seas to begin their new careers as zombie pirates. That bit just never got old.

When the credits began to roll, he wished Grandma Babcock good-night and walked up the stairs, wondering, as he sometimes did, where she went when she wasn’t somewhere Norman could see her.

*At least she stays out of my room most of the time,* Norman thought, sitting wearily on the edge of his bed. *I wouldn’t want her poking around in my underwear*

*drawer*. Though the most exciting thing anyone was liable to find there was Norman's bootlegged *Revenge of the Zombies* action-figure set.

It had been a very long day. Between the toad and Alvin and Neil trying to get him to stick out less and Salma trying to persuade him to improve his study habits, and the usual fun with the folks and big sis Courtney, Norman felt like he'd been squeezed through a car wash, then sucked up in a giant vacuum cleaner and spat back out again.

"Who cares if I sleep in my clothes?" he asked his *Portals of Peril* poster. When there was no response, Norman shoved off the books and clothes that had been piled on his bed and got under the covers.

From the ancient heating vents that snaked through the entire house, Norman could hear his parents' voices in a hushed and familiar conversation. His father's voice was louder than his mother's, and snippets of his remarks floated into Norman's ears.

"People talk, Sandra. Everybody knows he isn't normal."

His mother said something in a low voice that Norman couldn't make out.

"No, Sandra, you want to know what's crazy? That

uncle of yours. And I'm worried maybe Norman's got what *he* got."

More mumbling from Mrs. Babcock.

"I'm the man, and I'm telling you right now 'sensitive' is writing poetry and not doing sports. What Norman's got is way worse than sensitive."

Norman sighed and pulled the pillow over his head.

Norman and his dad had never exactly been best buddies, not like the fathers and sons you saw on television commercials for sporting-goods stores or build-your-own-telescope kits. But ever since the incident at the funeral home, it had been like this. His father just couldn't accept who Norman was. Really, none of his family could.

There came a point when Norman realized that if an entire town thought you were headed for the funny farm, there was no sense in pretending otherwise. That was why, after his grandmother died, Norman took the very uncomplicated step of acting exactly like the person he was. And that meant talking to people and pets and other things that had recently or not so recently departed the earth. He did it quietly, but he did it.

As a result, most people were not very comfortable around Norman. And no one was more not comfort-

able than Mr. Babcock, particularly after word of the funeral-home incident spread like wildfire through Blithe Hollow.

“Whatever,” mumbled Norman, turning onto his side and pulling the pillow off his head so he could get a bit of air.

A translucent moth was hovering around the head of the bed. Tiny spirit orbs no bigger than pinheads swirled near the moth’s wings.

“Hi,” Norman said.

The moth seemed to look at Norman, though it was hard to tell for sure. Then it flew really fast over to the lamp next to Norman’s bed, circled it a few times, then flew back toward Norman.

“What?” Norman asked.

The moth flew back to the lamp again, hovered there a moment, then dashed back.

“Oh, I think I get it,” Norman said. Then he reached up and turned on the light. Happy now, the phantom moth fluttered around the lightbulb.

“No problem,” Norman murmured. Then he fluffed his pillows a few times and got comfortable, leaving the light on so the dead moth could enjoy it.